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MODERN RESEARCH AND THE OLD TESTAMENT AS RELATED TO THE MINISTRY

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The struggle through which the world has been passing has revived interest in the Old Testament and particularly in the Prophets. We are coming to see more plainly than we formerly saw, that Christianity is a religion not merely of the New Testament but of the growing revelation of God's will seen clearly in the rise and fall and spiritual discipline of the Hebrew people. The study of the Old Testament from this point of view is more than a question of authorship and chronology. Such questions should be answered, but the vital matter for all teachers of religion is to realize the wealth of religious and moral guidance to be found throughout the Bible as a whole. The scholarship of the Old Testament is a handmaid of the revelation of the divine will in social and political experience.

The Christian minister is pre-eminently a teacher; as teacher he must be interpreter and critic. He must be equipped to face candidly the problems of biblical criticism. No longer may he arrogate to himself an exclusive position of superior knowledge or speak ex cathedra in the name of ecclesiastical tradition. In the interest of his own intellectual self-respect he is required to give a reason for the faith that is in him and that reason must be one that does no violence to the accepted results of sound scholarship. He must be open-minded; ready to welcome truth from whatever quarter it may come. During the past one hundred years knowledge has grown from more to more. The outlook on the universe which obtains today is vastly grander, more accurate, and more thrilling than the outlook of a century ago. If the sixteenth century chronicled a renaissance of ancient culture the nineteenth century introduced a new birth of

time which with keen-eyed intellect has set itself to seek truth alone and be satisfied with nothing less, whatever long-lived theories have to be discarded. So it has been in all departments of physical science, and not less has it been in Bible study. Today the achievements of this research are available. It is known that the New Testament writings are of much greater historical value than those of the Old Testament because they are more nearly contemporaneous with the events recorded than is often the case with those of the Old Testament. It is in connection with the Old Testament Scriptures that intelligence, straightforward honesty, and courage are especially needed in order to present their teaching free from grotesque and fallacious interpretations.

1. *At the outset it may be said that the method of the higher criticism is perfectly legitimate and reasonable and cannot fail to make a successful appeal to any intelligent person who will take pains to*

understand it. That it has been stigmatized as deliberately destructive of faith in the religious content of the Scriptures is due, first, to extreme and unwarranted liberties taken by a few ultra-rationalistic critics; and, secondly, to plain ignorance, whether voluntary or purblind, on the part of the opponents of the method. In the language of Dr. Orr: "Higher criticism rightly understood, is simply the careful scrutiny, on the principles which it is customary to apply to all literature, of the actual phenomena of the Bible with a view to deduce from these such conclusions as may be warranted regarding the age, authorship, mode of composition, sources, etc., of the different books. . . . Everyone who engages in such enquiries with whatever aim is a Higher Critic and cannot help himself."¹ From 1759 when Jean Astruc, a French physician practicing in Brussels, published his researches on the sources of the Book of Genesis, to the present day this undeniably sane method of investigation has been continued by an array of competent scholars who would grace any learned profession. Whatever the divine element in the Old Testament Scriptures may be, it is essential that, first of all, their literary and historical character should be dispassionately determined and this is just what the method known as higher criticism accomplishes.

2. *As a preliminary discipline one should approach the examination of the Old Testament without any a priori theory of inspiration.* It is regrettable that from the early days of Christianity to quite recent times the theory of the Old Testament writings being absolutely the Word of God, and therefore verbally

accurate and of historical infallibility, should have foreclosed independent investigation of these books and marked with the brand of heresy anyone who taught otherwise. Whatever defense may be made of the good services of this theory in former days in securing painstaking copying of the text and in establishing for the Bible a unique authority and causing it to be held in reverence, such defense is no longer tenable; in fact, the verbal inspiration theory, in the face of textual scholarship and historical inquiry, is the greatest obstacle to a correct understanding of these ancient documents. It should be borne in mind that the inerrancy of Scripture is a principle nowhere asserted or claimed in Scripture itself. It is well to derive the consciousness of the inspiration of the Scriptures from a scholarly study of the books themselves. For, to be satisfactory, one's theory of inspiration must be such as can include all the characteristics of the sacred writings. And the more thoroughly scholarly one's study of them becomes, the more definite and more consistent will one's theory of inspiration be and the more clearly it will be realized that an inspired writing need not be precisely harmonious in all its parts or void of all discrepancy. Moreover, it will become evident that forced mechanistic explanations of difficulties and discrepancies are ludicrously unnecessary.

3. *The minister must familiarize himself with the historical method of investigation.*

(a) He cannot hope to be helpful to the increasing number of intelligent, college-trained, young men and women

¹ *Problem of the Old Testament*, p. 9.

if he is too slothful to make himself conversant with the procedure of historical inquiry which, by the sheer force of its reasonableness, must continue to hold the field indefinitely in all phases of literary research. Not a little fun was evoked in certain quarters by the publication of the Polychrome Bible, but no one could glance through a volume of that series without having the fact brought squarely to his notice that the books of the Old Testament are not homogeneous in their composition, that they were not individually produced in their present condition at the same time. Professor Sayce rendered a fine service to intelligent Bible-study when, thirty-five years ago, he called attention to the Phoenician legends as forming the link between the Chaldean and the Hebrew Scriptures so far as the Elohist portions of the Book of Genesis are concerned, especially in the story of the creation and that of the sacrifice of Isaac. He also explained the very close resemblance between the Babylonian and the Jewish stories of the Garden of Eden, the Deluge, and the Tower of Babel, for which there are no Phoenician analogies. More recently, the study of the systematized code of Hammurabi,¹ the founder of the consolidated Babylonian empire, *ca.* 2100 B.C., has disclosed singular parallels to the Mosaic legislation, and it is by no means improbable that Moses became acquainted with some form of this code as a part of his Egyptian education. Established conclusions touching the composite character and late compilation of the Hexateuch, the largely unhistorical character of the Chronicles, the non-Davidic authorship of most of

the Psalms, the exilic date of the latter part of Isaiah, and the late date and extremely apocalyptic character of Daniel should be familiar to the minister as the result of his own study. It should be remembered, too, that the writers of the several portions of the Old Testament wrote in language which their contemporaries understood and therefore with conceptions of science and ethics peculiar to their own generations. The minister should also be acquainted with the most interesting of sidelights thrown by archaeology and anthropology on Bible records of social customs, taboos, and contemporary historic events. One should accustom one's self to the idea that the books of the Old Testament, especially the historical and poetical and much of the Wisdom Literature, represent a gradual growth, a repeated editing, and that not any one of them can be assigned to any particular generation. In their present form they represent the result of the writings of distinct and independent authors at widely different periods of the national life.

b) Further, it should be borne in mind that, as with the early literature of all other peoples so with that of the Hebrews, poetry preceded prose, tradition, transmitted by memory, preceded written history, and before the settlement of the Hebrews in Canaan and the beginning of organized national life literature in the formal sense was scarcely possible. Hence it follows that here and there, imbedded in the earlier books, we find snatches of poetry celebrating heroic deeds, and the exercise of a quickened imagination is indispensable to save one from dull, solemn blundering. An

¹ Identified by some scholars as Amraphel (Gen. 14:6).

example occurs in the Book of Joshua (10:12, 13, 14), where a quotation from the Book of Jashar is inserted. This Book of the Upright (or Brave) contained highly imaginative paeans in honor of Israel's early heroes. The incident of Joshua commanding the sun and the moon to stand still is not to be understood in a literal sense, despite the comment (vss. 13, 14) of an editor generations later. "Sun, stand thou still" is a poetical apostrophe. No unusual natural phenomenon followed the impassioned appeal of Israel's captain. All he meant was that he did not want the day to end before he had completely routed the enemy. How amusing it is to read the grave attempts of imaginative intellects to account for this "miraculous" interposition of Providence and adjust it to astronomical science—an absurd impossibility!

c) Again, the existence of myth and fable for the purpose of illustrating moral fact should cause no surprise. Surely truth may be taught in the guise of a fable; nor is it beneath the dignity of a divine revelation to use this literary vehicle of communication. The stories of the origin of sin in Genesis, of the bramble in Judges (9:8-15), of the vineyard in Isaiah (5:1-7), of the cherubim and the wheels in Ezekiel (chap. 1), and of the lamps and the olive trees in Zechariah (chap. 4) illustrate a method of instruction which appeals to an imaginative people and should be interpreted accordingly.

d) Again, it should be remembered that the Old Testament Scriptures are the literary remains of the Jewish people before the Christian era.¹ They constitute a literature rather than a book. Some parts are historical or quasi-historical narratives; some are poetical; some are devotional, e.g., many of the Psalms and prayers here and there in the historical and prophetic books; some are dramatic, of which the Book of Job is the classic masterpiece; some are Wisdom Literature, e.g., the Proverbs, a collection of aphorisms, maxims, and epigrammatic dissertations on wisdom as applied to success in life, social and industrial, the wise man and the fool being brought into contrast to heighten the vividness of the instruction; some celebrate human love, e.g., the beautiful pastoral of Ruth and the Song of Solomon with its highly colored sensuous descriptions. Some are devoted to the somber emptiness, the *vanitas vanitatum*, of human ambitions, however filled with material blessings the life may be, e.g., the Book of Ecclesiastes; some are prophetic with their impassioned denunciations of social cruelty and oppression and their vibrant, passionate demands for social righteousness and good neighborliness, the prophets being the successors of the seers (I Sam. 9:9); some are legalistic, either in the strictly ecclesiastical sense, e.g., Leviticus, or in the civic sense, e.g., Deuteronomy; some are apocalyptic and mystical, e.g., the latter part of

¹ Moulton's *Modern Reader's Bible Series* and Sander and Kent's *Messages of the Bible Series* are very helpful.

Driver's *Literature of the Old Testament* is full of well-considered information, and the various articles in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* bearing on Old Testament history and literature are of great value.

Daniel. Throughout the books all forms of literary expression may be found. From the point of view of the literary work of a racial unit the Old Testament Scriptures should be studied with as complete a knowledge of the local and foreign background of their several parts as is available.

e) A working knowledge of the Hebrew language is exceedingly desirable. Much may be said in favor of a good translation into the "vulgar" tongue, but no one can fully appreciate the niceties of shades of meaning and distinctions between grammatical forms and synonymous words and gain a clear insight into the author's conception who is not equipped with an understanding of the author's own language. Why Hebrew has fallen into disfavor as a study of fundamental importance in divinity schools is an interesting question. It is a language full of beauty and expressiveness and easily mastered, much more so than Latin. Shall we say that nothing but shameful indolence is responsible for this serious defect in the education of so many ministers? The illustrious fame of Dr. W. R. Harper in the world of scholarship rests on his expert knowledge of Hebrew and anyone who has the privilege of recalling his masterly interpretation of the Old Testament can never forget the whole-hearted enthusiasm with which he addressed himself to the work in which he was an outstanding specialist.

4. *No one can sympathetically study the Old Testament in the light of modern research without discovering the divine element that pervades it.* While the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament comprise literary work extending over many

centuries, it is clear that a certain unity runs through the collection and makes them one testament, whose spiritual value is the self-revelation of God to man through the thoughts and genius of one of the gifted nations of ancient times. The doctrine of God is progressive in its unfolding, gradually attaining the monotheistic conception, gradually extending from the idea of a local deity to that of the God of the whole earth, and gradually refined from a conception of God as aiding and abetting cruelty to the conception of God as Righteous and Holy. Running all through the Old Testament is *the messianic idea*, the hope of a Deliverer, a Savior, finding its culmination in the Suffering, Atoning Servant of the Lord in Isa., chap. 53, who by his sacrificial death justifies, makes just and good, those who imbibe and exemplify his spirit and who in the fulness of time shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied. Here is the supreme spiritual worth of Old Testament teaching, the regnancy of spiritual forces in individual, community, and world life, triumphant over suffering and death itself, the world's only true redemption. Necessarily colored by the thoughts and conceptions of the people through whose medium it is delivered it may be said that religiously the main object of the Old Testament is the self-revelation of God and the development of the master-truth that all history pointed to the Incarnation of the Son of God. It is true that the inspiration of the books is by no means uniform or of equal value. There is no need to hesitate to reject some accounts as inaccurate, judged by scientific standards, or to correct details of misinformation by the aid of the light

of archaeology. Certain parts of the Old Testament are ethically objectionable; some of the harsh judgments expressed are entirely contrary to Christian principles. Such stories as the menagerie in Noah's ark, or the Talking Ass (Num. 23:28), or Jonah in the whale's belly, or the setting back of the shadow of the sundial (II Kings 20:8-11 and Isa. 38:4-8) need not be regarded as actual history. But, notwithstanding these features, the vital value of the Old Testament remains unimpaired and its main object—the advent of the Desire of all Nations—stands forth with increasingly unmistakable definiteness; for the history of the Jews was rightly interpreted by their own religious leaders as a testament, a covenant between God and His people, dating from the patriarchal period, and foreshadowing the New Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ in which the spiritual value of the Old Testament finds its fulfilment and fruition. Holy men of old wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost at various times and in divers manners, but in these last days God hath spoken to us by His Son, and every Scripture given by inspiration of God is profitable. The treasure is indeed in earthen vessels, and it would be an act of astonishing stultification to ignore the treasure because the vessels are earthen. The old-fashioned view of Scripture as a textual armory of equally divine authenticity in all its parts cannot be maintained in the presence of modern investigation. But this does not justify the abandonment of reverence for those writings and the unique, unapproachable place they will ever hold as national literature of incomparable worth, not only because of their literary

merits, but also because of their unexcelled contribution to the religious life of mankind.

To interpret the Old Testament in the language of today and make it a living book of books is a task which the Christian minister should be prepared gladly to undertake for the permanent benefit of his congregation. It is a task which needs to be undertaken especially by religious teachers who minister to student communities. The reprehensible abuse of academic freedom which is exercised by some instructors who use their position to inject fantastic notions and cheap jesting concerning the Bible and religion into the minds of their students should be diligently counteracted by instruction based on sound and reverent scholarship. Because an instructor is *facile princeps* in the department of history, or physical science, or philosophy, it does not follow that he is also eminent in biblical scholarship. In the latter department of learning he may be totally uninstructed and incompetent to pass judgment. On the Christian minister the task devolves to make himself expert in biblical learning. Not to shatter faith, but to confirm it; to make the Old Testament teaching reasonable in the best sense and so to instruct young people that their religious knowledge and spiritual growth cannot be imperiled by their secular education should be the cherished ambition of every teacher who aspires to minister acceptably to the persistent religious needs of his hearers. The work necessary to realize this ambition cannot fail to be well repaid.

It should go without saying that this paper is intended (1) to suggest lines of

research for the minister to pursue in the privacy of his study; (2) to provide an assurance of intellectual self-respect and confidence, vitality, and vigor for use in pulpit work.

In the pulpit, only the well-digested, matured results of this work should appear and should be presented in language plain and dignified, as befits a prophet of the divine message.

MAKING CHRISTIANITY SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY

II. DEMOCRACY AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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I. The Meaning of Religious Experience

What is religion? To define it in terms of content is perhaps impossible in view of the great variety of beliefs and practices which we find. But it is not difficult to ascertain what men are trying to do when they are religious. They are reaching out into the invisible realm for such help and companionship as may be found there. So vast is this realm, and so little is known about it, that all sorts of experiments have been made in order to discover how best man may relate himself vitally and fruitfully to the environing mystery which possesses such potencies for good or for evil. To make the powers of the universe propitious, so that such blessings as good crops, success in hunting or fishing, good health, protection from wild beasts, hostile men, plagues, and pestilence, or deliverance from death, may be secured, are some of the aims of religion in relation to primary facts of experience.

Now in the course of the centuries of human experimentation, religions change. Some experiments prove to be successful. Others prove to be disappointing. New ways of living in relation to human beings suggest new ways of approach to the gods. The history of religious ideas and practices bears a vital relation to the changing culture of men. Professor Coe has said that the meaning of a conception of God is the "conviction that what is most important for us is *really* important, that is, respected and provided for by the reality upon which we depend."¹ If this is true, the religion of any group of men or of any generation will consist in trying to obtain from the invisible realm the aid necessary to secure the things most valued in that particular group or generation. We have had a recent illustration of this in Germany where men appealed to the "good old German God," and, in the words of one of the foremost living German philosophers, declared

¹ *Psychology of Religion*, p. 106.